G16: Policy on the Management of Stress

Introduction

Stress is defined by the Health & Safety Executive as "the reaction people have to excessive pressure or other type of demand placed on them. It arises when they worry they can't cope". Stress is rarely caused by an individual event and may have work and personal causes.

The County Council is committed to promoting and securing the good health of employees and recognises that stress could affect any employee's health. Within the County Council stress related sickness and ill-health is a major cause of absence and early retirement.

Work involves pressures and demands that often have a positive effect on employees' performance at work. However, where pressures are excessive, stress can result as a negative effect to cope with pressure.
Everyone has a point at which, subject to enough pressure, they will start to suffer stress. To suffer from stress does not reflect any degree of personal weakness and all employees are encouraged to be open and honest in discussing stress with colleagues, managers and trade union representatives.

County Council employees work in many complex and challenging situations often dealing with people who may be highly anxious or distressed. Due to the very nature of this work it will not always be possible to remove all factors which cause stress to our employees. However, we will ensure as far as possible that the effects of these stressful situations are minimised through appropriate training, management and support.

This policy supplements the policies and initiatives that the County Council already has in place for, or associated with, managing employee stress.

These include:

- procedure for dealing with sickness absence
- Harassment and bullying procedure
- Employee Development and Performance Review(EPDR) protocol
- staff supervision arrangements
- 'Stress and you' guidance leaflet for employees
- employee counselling service
- SHIFTS Health promotion programme
- Occupational Health Service
- Safety Manual Briefing B32 "Stress Management"
- Working Time Regulations and Departmental Guidelines.

This Policy is an extension of the County Council's safety policy statement. Its aim is to establish a consistent and effective framework for managing employee stress and consequently to reduce the exposure and effects of excessive stress within the workplace to acceptable levels wherever reasonably practicable.

Policy Statement

The County Council accepts its legal duty under Section 2(1) of the **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974** to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of its employees at work. This duty includes seeking to protect employees from undue stress at work.

In order to reduce to the lowest level reasonably practicable the risk to the health of its employees from undue stress at work, the County Council will:

- **monitor**, both at a corporate and local level, levels of stress within the organisation on a regular basis to identify areas which may require stress control strategies to be implemented.
- **benchmark** between different areas of the Authority and with other organisations to identify and learn from best practice.
- **set Corporate and Departmental targets** for the reduction of stress related sickness absence.
- **review progress** against the targets for the reduction of stress related sickness absence.
- **review progress** against the targets annually.
- so far as is reasonably practicable **introduce changes** to work practices and procedures where unacceptable risks of undue stress are identified.
- ensure managers are able to **recognise the signs and symptoms** of stress and understand the practical approaches they should adopt to identify and minimise stress.
- **provide information** to all employees, and development where appropriate, to raise their awareness and enable them to recognise the symptoms of stress and the measures they may adopt to manage personal stress.
- **provide appropriate guidance and support** to any employee who suffers through undue stress at work.
- **evaluate and review** the effectiveness of the Policy and the procedures for the management of stress on a regular basis.

It is recognised that identifying and managing stress needs the co-operation and involvement of employees. In particular employees should:

- **raise any concerns** about work or home pressures with their line manager or other appropriate person, i.e. HR Officer.
- **co-operate and assist** line managers in helping to identify any causes of stress at work.
- where stress hazards are identified, play an active role in **helping to identify workplace changes** to reduce the risk from stress.

- **minimise their own risk** of stress related ill-health by undertaking their work in a safe and healthy manner i.e. not working excessively long hours, taking prescribed rest breaks etc.

Implementation

Each Corporate Director shall be responsible for ensuring that this policy is effectively implemented in their Department.

Monitoring

The Policy will be monitored through the following mechanisms:

- **the Service Director (Human Resources)**, **Policy, Planning and Corporate Services Department** will review the suitability, implementation and effectiveness of this policy annually and report to the Cabinet Member for Policy, Planning and Corporate Services.
- **the Service Director (Human Resources), Policy, Planning and Corporate Services Department** will review the suitability, implementation and effectiveness of this policy annually and report to **Corporate Leadership Team (CLT).**
- the level of sickness absence, ill-health and early retirement associated with stress or its related conditions will be reported to CLT annually and **Departmental Management Teams (DMT)** at least every 6 months.
- the level and nature of referrals to the Counselling Service will be reported to each DMT every 6 months and CLT annually. No information shall be provided which could breach the confidentiality of any employee attending the Counselling Service
- each DMT will review their implementation of this policy annually.

Supporting Guidelines - Appendix

1. Introduction

The County Council has stated its commitment to reducing the risks to the health of employees from stress at work. These guidelines are intended to assist in the implementation of that policy.

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2. Workplace Factors which may Cause Stress

The following are some of the factors that may lead to stress at work. Occupational stressors may be:

Job related factors:

- long hours / shiftwork
- changes in responsibility
- dealing with challenging behaviour / confrontational situations
- lone working
- repetitive / mundane tasks / low workload
- high / unpredictable workload
- multiple priorities
- perceived high risk of injury or infection
- exposure to verbal / physical violence

Environmental factors:

- high noise levels / persistent aggravating noise
- excesses of temperature / ventilation
- inadequate lighting
- inadequate space
- poor ergonomic layouts
- change

Organisational factors

- management style
- lack of involvement in decision making
- lack of autonomy / control over work content
- poor feedback of performance
- in adequate training and support

Personal factors

- home / work interface
- relationship with colleagues
- harassment and bullying
- inadequate training
- job security

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3. Identifying Workplace Stress

The following tools and techniques may assist in identifying workplace stress:

- risk assessments: health and safety risk assessments conducted for employees' activities should consider the existence of occupational stressors (For further information see Section 5 below)
- by asking employees if they feel they may have any work related stress problems using existing management supervision processes.
- by analysing sickness absence information.

- by analysing management information from other sources such as the Occupational Health Service and Counselling Service.
- by informally monitoring the performance of employees on an on-going basis.

4. Identifying Stress in Others

Some employees may be reluctant to offer and discuss information about their health and well-being, particularly in relation to stress. Therefore line managers should respond appropriately to noticeable changes in an employee's performance, such as:

- a sudden loss of motivation or commitment
- erratic or poor time keeping
- a reduction in work performance
- poor decision making
- increase in sickness absence levels
- signs of irritability or aggression
- resentment of advice
- a reduced willingness to co-operate
- becoming withdrawn or unsociable
- other significant changes in behaviour.

5. Risk Assessment

The County Council is legally obliged to carry out risk assessments to ensure that any risks of injury or ill-health arising form our work activities are identified and properly controlled.
Within the County Council there are a range of factors, such as exposure to conflict situations, which could lead to stress and ultimately ill-health for employees.
Some of these stress factors, or so-called stressors, are listed in Section 2 of this guidance.

When you are conducting or reviewing a risk assessment for your employees work activities you should consider if any of the factors in Section 2 may be present. Where stressors are identified you should consider how the risk of ill-health associated with them can be reduced. Section 7 of this guidance suggests how some typical stress factors may be tackled.

If you are unsure how to go about carrying out risk assessments then speak to your Departmental Health and Safety Adviser. Your advisor will be able to direct you to appropriate training and offer support and assistance.

6. Resolving Stress Issues

Many issues related to workplace stress may be solved through discussions and agreement between the manager and employee. Where any significant changes are proposed these should be documented.

However not all issues can be resolved easily. Managers should not feel that they must always come up with a quick fix solution. It is important to take time to listen to your employees, acknowledge their problems and offer support.

Where the manager and employee are unable to resolve the issue further help and advice are available. These sources are detailed in Section 9.

Where stress is identified as an issue for a group of employees instead of just an individual then a focus group with the employees, or a selection of them, may help to fully explore the particular causes of the stress. To encourage honesty and openness it is preferable for focus groups to be facilitated by someone seen as external to the service area or Department concerned, for example, an employee counsellor.

These guidelines principally refer to workplace stress. However, pressures or stress factors may also arise outside the workplace.

Employers do not have a legal duty to prevent ill-health due to stress arising form circumstances outside work. However, non-work stress and pressures may make employees more vulnerable to stress at work as well as affecting their performance and judgement.

In these circumstances access to internal support facilities, such as the Counselling Service, may assist together with understanding and flexibility on the part of the manager.

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7. Workplace Changes

The following may assist in identifying steps to reduce workplace stress for the stressors identified:

Job related factors

- **long hours / shiftwork** - ensure any legal requirements are complied with in relation to drivers, VDU operators, and all employees under the working time regulations. Consider alternative shift patterns, rotas etc. and ensure that there are opportunities for breaks and annual leave to be taken.
- **changes in responsibility** - ensure appropriate training and support is given.
- dealing with challenging behaviour / confrontational situations - ensure risk assessments have been carried out and appropriate training given. Implement arrangements for post incident support.
- **lone working** - ensure risk assessments have been carried out and measures are in place to protect the employee in line with Corporate and Departmental guidelines.

- **repetitive / mundane tasks** - consider job rotation and alternative working methods.
- high / unpredictable workload - examine the organisation and distribution of work. Assist to determine priorities.
- **multiple priorities** - provide direction as to key priorities.
- **perceived high risk of injury or infection** - provide appropriate training and information regarding risks, appropriate work practices and protective equipment.
- **exposure to verbal / physical violence** - ensure safe working practices are in place, appropriate training given and offer post incident support.

Environmental factors

- **high noise levels / persistent aggravating noise** - consider steps to minimise nuisance noise and the need for a formal assessment under the Noise at Work regulations for high noise situations.
- **excesses of temperature / ventilation** - consider steps that can be taken to maintain a comfortable working environment.
- **inadequate lighting** - consider recommendations for specific tasks e.g. VDU work, otherwise ensure illumination is sufficient for the task being undertaken.
- **inadequate space** - consider the layout of the work area to ensure adequate personal space
- **poor ergonomic layouts** - ensure workstations and equipment are positioned to suit the needs of the employee as far as possible.

Organisational factors

Employees work best where:

- they are involved in the decision making process and kept up to date with changes
- the management style is open, consistent, competent, communicative and caring
- they have responsibility for their work
- they have control over work content
- effective performance is recognised and valued.

Personal factors

Home / work interface - consider changes to work patterns and use policies already in place e.g. flexi-leave and urgent domestic leave, etc.

- **relationship with colleagues** - identify the source of the problem and take appropriate action.
- **harassment and bullying** - refer to the Council's procedure for dealing with these issues.
- **inadequate training** - ensure training and development needs are considered on a regular basis.
- **job security** - where changes are to be considered employees should be kept informed on a regular basis.

This list does not cover all issues and is only a guide. For more detailed help refer to Section 9.

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8. Training

Managers should be aware of the causes of stress, understand how to recognise it and know how to manage it. Managers training and development needs in this respect should be considered as part of the Employee Development and Performance Review (EDPR)

Similarly employees training and development needs should be considered as part of EDPR. Where employees are suffering stress then personal development may help to develop coping strategies in addition to the introduction of management controls.

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9. Further Help

Counselling Service

Employees considering accessing this service should always in the first instance discuss this with their line manager, or with their HR contact if discussion with the manager is not appropriate to the particular circumstances.

Employee Support and Health Promotion Service

The Council's health promotion programme sees to encourage employees to take an interest in health and well-being. The programme consists of:

- exercise classes, many of which are free
- regular seminars / workshops on healthy lifestyles.

See Section G4 for further information contact the Occupational Health Service

Health and Safety Advice

Each Department has its own health and safety adviser who can offer support with:

- completion of risk assessments
- advice on legislation
- workplace inspections.

There is a corporate leaflet called 'Stress and You' which is available from your Health and safety Adviser. Further guidance on stress can be found in Section B32 of the Corporate Safety Manual.

HR Advice

Each Department has it own HR Team who can provide advice on all hr issues, e.g. grievance, harassment, discipline, sickness absence etc. All policies and procedures are contained in the Personnel Handbook to which Managers should have access.

Occupational Health Service

Employees have access to the Occupational Health Service for advice on health problems, particularly those relating to their work or the conditions in which it is carried out. Contact tel: 01623 665960.

Harassment Complaints Procedure

This procedure is available to all employees of the Authority, with the exception of school based employees, who are experiencing harassment, intimidation, bullying, unfair treatment, discrimination or victimisation.

See Section E5 for further information.

Trade Unions

Trade Unions may be able to provide employees with help, support and advice on a wide range of personnel and health and safety issues.

External Sources of Help

No Smoking Quitline	tel: 0800 002200
Alcohol problems advisory service	tel: 0115 941 4747
Relate (marriage guidance)	tel: 0300 100 1234
Alcoholics Anonymous	tel: 08457 697 555
Rape Crisis Centre	tel: 0115 941 0440
Teacher Stress Line	tel: 08000 562 561